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FARMERS' RAIL BLOCKADE PEACEFUL

The noon to 4 pm agitation had minimal impact on train services across the country, Indian Railways officials said

TRAINS HALTED AT STATIONS IN FEROZEPUR

In Punjab, protesters sat on tracks at many places on the Delhi-Ludhiana-Amritsar railway route. The Ferozepur division halted trains at stations so that passengers faced less inconvenience during the protest

RESUMED NORMAL OPERATIONS AFTER 4 PM

No untoward incident was reported. Train movement in all the zones resumed to normal after the agitation. The railways had deployed 20 additional companies of the RPF across the country, especially in Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal

CAUTIOUS DELHI METRO

Entry and exit at four metro stations, including at the Tikri border, were shut by the DMRC authorities for nearly four hours in view of the security situation due to a rail blockade. The Tikri Border metro station is near the farmers' protest site. The entry, exit points were reopened after the four-hour protest ended. Meanwhile, the Delhi Police and paramilitary personnel kept a tight vigil in several parts of the National Capital

ELSEWHERE IN THE COUNTRY

At least 12 people were detained at Lasur station in Aurangabad after they stopped the Jalna-Mumbai Janshatabdi train ahead of the protest schedule

In Rajasthan, the Rewari-Sri Ganganagar special train was cancelled. Apart from this, the protest was largely symbolic with little impact on traffic

In Bengaluru, the protest was low-key but there was a good turnout of protesters in Raichur, Belagavi and Davangere, where some were arrested | P4

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TRAINS REGULATED DURING THE STIR

Farmers leader Rakesh Tikait said there would be no let up in the protest, and urged his colleagues to even be prepared to sacrifice their standing crop

CHENNAI • MADURAI • VIJAYAWADA • BENGALURU • KOCHI • HYDERABAD • VISAKHAPATNAM • COIMBATORE • KOZHIKODE • THIRUVANANTHAPURAM • BELAGAVI • BHUBANESWAR • SHIVAMOGGA • MANGALURU • TIRUPATI • TIRUCHY • TIRUNELVELI • SAMBALPUR • HUBBALLI • DHARWAPURI • KOTTAYAM • KANNUR • VILUPPURAM • KOLLAM • WARANGAL • TADEPALLIGUDEM • NAGAPATTINAM • THRISSUR • KALABURAGI

Modi moots spl visas for docs, nurses in India's neighbourhood

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ New Delhi

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday suggested the creation of special visas for doctors and nurses in neighbouring countries to help them respond to health emergencies in the region more effectively.

The Prime Minister was addressing a workshop, initiated by India, on Covid management. "Over the past year, our health cooperation has already achieved so much. Can we now think of raising our ambition further? Can we consider creating a special visa scheme for our doctors and nurses, so that they can travel quickly within our region during health emergencies, on the request of the receiving country?" he said.

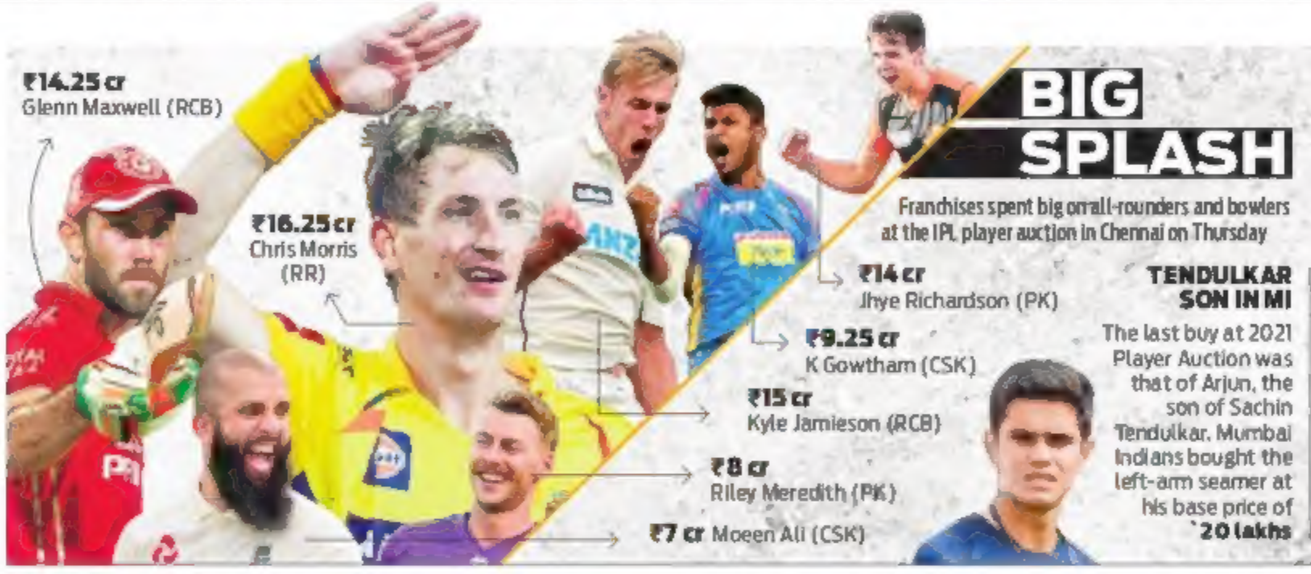
The workshop assumed significance as, for the first time in years, Pakistan attended an event initiated by India. Representatives of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Mauritius, Nepal, Seychelles and Sri Lanka participated.

Modi made a slew of other suggestions, including the creation of an air ambulance agreement and a platform for collating, compiling and studying data about the effectiveness of Covid vaccines among the population. Recalling how a Covid-19 Emergency Fund was created last year by the SAARC member states, he sought cooperation for rapid deployment of vaccines.

All countries, including Pakistan, supported Modi's proposals, said sources. They suggested a structured discussion for regional cooperation on these proposals to take them forward. All countries, except Pakistan, thanked India and Modi for vaccine supply, and of medicines, equipment and training in the past.

LOCKDOWNS BACK IN PARTS OF MAHARASHTRA

With fresh Covid cases spiralling again, Maharashtra ordered a 10-day lockdown in Yavatmal district from Thursday night. Also, weekend lockdown was announced in Amravati district from 8 pm on Saturday to 7 am on Monday. The state reported 4,787 new COVID-19 cases on Wednesday, the highest one-day count this year



BIG SPLASH

Franchises spent big on all-rounders and bowlers at the IPL player auction in Chennai on Thursday

TENDULKAR SON IN MI

The last buy at 2021 Player Auction was that of Arjun, the son of Sachin Tendulkar. Mumbai Indians bought the left-arm seamer at his base price of `20 lakhs

PACERS ARE THE NEW SEXY

Bowlers capable of generating heat (think Ferguson, Bumrah, Nortje, Rabada Archer) have done well in recent seasons. So it was no surprise to see the likes of Meredith -- who touches north of 145 km/ph easily -- commanding attention. Put Milne (Mumbai) and Richardson (Punjab) in the same bracket.

SPECIALIST OPENERS FAIL

If recency bias was anything, Alex Hales, who was an inspiration at the Big Bash, should have got a bid. But he didn't. One reason maybe he doesn't bowl. Ditto Jason Roy. Liam Livingstone, a six-hitting machine, got a bid but only because he bowls the odd over | P17

PLAYING IT SAFE

GOVT FOR CHECKS ON CONTRACT EMPLOYEES

Normally, when work or human resource is outsourced, the contractor tends to maximise profits by going in for cheap labour and sometimes ends up hiring people with criminal background

Shivaram Hebbar, Labour Minister

ASHWINI M SRIPAD @ Bengaluru

THE State Government is pushing private firms, which hire employees on contract, to go in for police verification before recruiting them. This, the government feels, is necessary to ensure the safety of other employees, specially women, and also the employer.

Labour Minister Shivaram Hebbar said that over the last few months, many cases have come to their notice where contract workers had criminal background. "While companies or industries conduct background verification for permanent staff, it is not done for contract workers. Normally, when work or human resource is outsourced, the contractor tends to maximise profits by going in for cheap labour and sometimes ends up hiring people with criminal background," he pointed out.

He said they are now sending letters to all the companies to henceforth follow a system of verifying the antecedents of employees. "Employing such people could be dangerous, especially when there are women employees. This is just a precautionary measure at the workplace." P7

WISTRON TO RESTART OPS AT KOLAR FACILITY

The state has always strived to provide a friendly environment to investors and industries. After the incident, the company has started hiring people and they will soon start operations

Jagadish Shettar, Industries Minister

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Bengaluru

TAIWANESE company Wistron Corporation, a major contract manufacturer of Apple's iPhones, will soon restart its operations at the Narasapura facility near Kolar, Industries Minister Jagadish Shettar said on Thursday. The facility had shut down operations after worker unrest over unpaid wages.

Shettar met Sudipto Gupta, Managing Director, Innovation Business Group, Wistron Smart Devices, and other representatives of the firm at his office when they called on him to express gratitude for the cooperation extended by the State Government in restarting operations.

Shettar said it is unfortunate such an incident occurred in Karnataka. The state has always strived to provide a friendly environment to investors and industries. After the incident, the company has started hiring people and they will soon start operations, he said. He also assured full support to the industry and urged the company authorities to hire people from across Karnataka.

Sudipto too said they have started preparations and will soon start their operations.

Karnataka budget on March 8

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ Bengaluru

CHIEF Minister B S Yediyurappa will present the State Budget on March 8. The dates for the budget session, stretching for almost the whole of March, was approved by the State Cabinet on Thursday.

The budget session will begin on March 4 and the first two days will be allotted for discussions on 'One Nation, One Election', said Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Basavaraj Bommai. "The budget session will begin from March 4. We will dedicate two days — March 4 and 5 — to debate One Nation One Election as discussed in the business advisory committee meeting previously. The Chief Minister will present the budget on March 8. The legislature session will continue till the end of March," Bommai said.

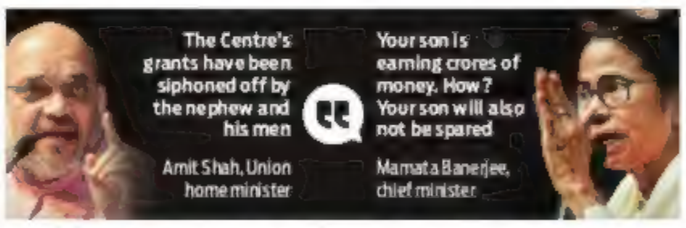
The cabinet has also approved an estimated Rs 700 crore towards treatment of Covid-19 patients till March 31 in various government and private hospitals across the state. "The government's contribution for Covid-19 treatment in government and private hospitals till January was Rs 620 crore. It is estimated that we will require another Rs 80 crore till March 31. A total of Rs 700 crore will be paid from Suvarna Karnataka Arogya scheme," Bommai said. P4

Nephew and son in the spotlight as Shah, Didi trade barbs on nepotism

PRANAB MONDAL @ Kolkata

UNION Home Minister Amit Shah and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee were on Thursday locked in a war of words while addressing two separate rallies in South 24 Parganas district on the issue of nepotism.

With Shah accusing Mamata's nephew Abhishek Banerjee of siphoning off the Centre's grants meant for people's welfare and warning that the BJP-led government, after wresting power in Bengal, would bring all culprits to book, Mamata hit back saying Shah's son will also not be spared either for earning crores of rupees. Abhishek represents Diamond Harbour in South 24 Parganas in the Lok Sabha and Jay Amit Shah is the powerful secretary of the Indian cricket board.


The Centre's grants have been siphoned off by the nephew and his men
Amit Shah, Union home minister
Your son is earning crores of money. How? Your son will also not be spared
Mamata Banerjee, chief minister

While addressing a rally at Namkhana, Shah said, "Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government gave financial assistance of ₹3,59,000 crore in the past five years for the people of West Bengal. But the money was siphoned off by the nephew and his men. If the BJP wrests power in Bengal, the new government will find the culprits even if they take refuge under the ground, and put them behind bars."

A riled Mamata for the first time responded to the nephew barb. "Every day you (Shah) raise the nephew issue. Your son is earning crores of money. How? Your son will also not be spared," she growled.

Alleging corruption in distributing relief to cyclone Amphan's victims, Shah said the Centre's grant was stolen by Abhishek and TMC's goons. A few kilometres away from Shah's rally venue, Mamata gave it back while addressing a gathering in Pailan in the same district. "My family will not do anything that could malign the image of Bengal... Abhishek is facing attacks because of me." P10

Air pollution claimed 12K lives in B'luru

BOSKY KHANNA @ Bengaluru

THE adverse health effects of rising air pollution may already be known, but the number of deaths caused due to it could come as a shocker. According to a Greenpeace report released on Thursday, particulate matter (PM) 2.5 had claimed 12,000 lives in Bengaluru alone in 2020. In Delhi, 54,000 lives were lost in the same year.

This was revealed by the Greenpeace Southeast Asia analysis of IQAir data from a live cost estimator. According to the analysis, globally, approximate 1,60,000 deaths have been attributed to PM 2.5 air pollution in the five most populous cities.

To show the impact of air pollution-related deaths on the economy, Greenpeace employed the "willingness-to-pay" approach. The damage is equally worrying in other Indian cities. An estimated 25,000 avoidable deaths in Mumbai in 2020 have been attributed to air pollution. Chennai and Hyderabad accounted for 11,000 avoidable deaths each due to polluted air, the report said.

An official of the Karnataka State Pollution Control Board (KSPCB) in Bengaluru said the biggest cause of PM2.5 is the ongoing construction activities. Despite Rs 279 crore being given to BBMP by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Ecology under the National Clean Air Mission to mitigate air pollution, little can be seen on ground. "The KSPCB also gave Rs 2.2 crore to BBMP for procure air sprinklers, but that is also not to be seen," the official said.

All stakeholders, including the BBMP, transport utilities and KSPCB, had committed before the NGT and State to mitigate air pollution by listing out a 44-point action plan. But this has become difficult to implement due to shortage of funds, the official added. P2

IN THE NICK OF TIME

Girl foils parents' Devadasi plan, dials cops

KIRAN BALANNANAVAR
@ Vijayanagara

IN a chilling reminder that some parts of Karnataka have managed to keep alive inhumane practices like the Devadasi system, a 19-year-old girl from Vijayanagara district was rescued last week, after she tipped off police about her parents' shocking plan to push her into this tradition.

The district administration and officials from the Devadasi Nirmoolana Kendra, a centre that works under the women and child welfare department, rescued the girl and warned her parents. Despite being banned, the Devadasi system is still in practice in several parts of North Karnataka.

Officials said Manjula (name changed) was in love with a boy from the neighbourhood, but faced stiff opposition from her family. With only two daughters, her parents were apprehensive that their property would be taken away by Manjula and her husband.

Upon learning that her parents were planning the Devadasi rituals, the girl contacted the police. "The girl's mother is a former devadasi and was keen on pushing her daughter into the practice. Though it's practised in the name of goddesses, girls become sex slaves with no future. After she contacted police last week, we prepared for a raid. Three days after the raid, her parents finally agreed to get their daughter married. The case was solved easily as the victim herself informed the police. She was kept in a government facility before her marriage with her friend a few days later," the official said.

The Yellamma temple in Saudatti was known for the Devadasi system

Her parents were made to write a letter to police, stating that they will not change their mind. P7

EXPRESS READ

Karnataka to get new health policy soon

Bengaluru: Karnataka is all set to come up with a new health policy, which is likely to be ready by the second week of April. Disclosing this, Health Minister Dr K Sudhakar said that the policy will include every aspect of healthcare — non-communicable diseases, addressing poor lifestyles, communicable diseases, hygiene and sanitation measures. P3

Apartment is largest Covid cluster in B'luru

Bengaluru: With cases rising to 109 by Thursday evening, the Covid cluster at an apartment complex in Bommanahalli Zone has now become one of the biggest clusters to be reported in a single area in Bengaluru, said the Chief Health Officer of the BBMP. The apartment complex has been declared a containment zone, said a BBMP official. P3

Pondy floor test on Feb 22

Puducherry: Puducherry Lt Governor Tamilisai Soundararajan on Thursday ordered a floor test for the Congress government on February 22. P7

WITH THIS ISSUE

INDULGE

34 PAGES, INCLUDING 16 OF INDULGE (TABLOID)

FB 'unlikes' Australia

... over a proposed law to force it to share ad revenue with media. Here's why it's putting the squeeze

THE BIG NUMBERS

17 million
Australians disenfranchised from sharing news content

50% People dependent on Google and Facebook for news access

2.8 billion Facebook users worldwide can't share articles from Australian publishers

OZ BILL
Aims to make big tech firms compensate local media for losses in advertising revenue

FB COUNTERPOINT

5.1 billion Free referrals for Australian publishers created

$315 million Worth revenue generated for publishers

WHY WORRY
Fear Australia's action can inspire similar laws across the world
Google is already signing deals with publishers in other countries | P12